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Towards a Comparative Approach of Bantuisms in Iberoamerica¹

Professor-doctor Nina Rodrigues in Salvador, the capital of the state of Bahia, initiated African studies in Brazil in the last decades of the nineteenth century. Bahia state is located in the northeastern region of Brazil, and the city of Salvador, besides having been its first capital from 1549 to 1763 was the largest and most important trade centre for the transatlantic trade in Portuguese America. Today, Salvador is the third major city of Brazil with a population of more than 2,700,000, eighty percent of which is of African descent.

At the time of Rodrigues's research, the majority of the city's black population was composed of slaves and free men of African origin working in urban and domestic jobs. Among them a majority of Yoruba-Nagots maintained direct contact with the Gulf of Benin through merchants sailing from Lagos (Nigeria) several times a year carrying the so-called *products-of-the-coast* (clothes, collars, shells, fruits, etc.). This type of trade was destined to meet the demands of the local population as it concerned the products necessary to maintain African religious cults or used in the Candomblé houses condemned by the press of that epoch as *noisy cults frequented by persons of all classes* (*Pelourinho Informa* 1980: 35-37). This trade, on the other hand, promoted the return of Africans and their descents born in Brazil, the *agudás*, to Africa, where they founded the Brazilian communities of Benin and Nigeria keeping their Portuguese family names such as Rocha, Pereira, Souza, Olímpio, among others. The last of those voyages took place in 1898. Thereafter, the English authorities in Nigeria, fearful of the cholera epidemic that had broken out on board, dissolved the boat line Brazil-Lagos, or rather, Bahia-Lagos in 1903 (Pessoa de Castro 1964: 41-56; Verger 1968).

¹ This is a revised version of my contribution to the volume *Kilombo*, Ngowe, Nicholas (ed.). Libreville: Cerafia (2001: 29-35). Translation from Portuguese into English by Ineke Phaf-Rheinberger.

According to the testimony of Rodrigues, the Yoruba language, whose written literature was established by the circulation of journals such as *Ewe Irohin Eko* (Lagos Journal) in Nigeria, was taught to the blacks of Bahia by other blacks, who had learned it in school from the missionaries in Lagos. This was, incidentally, the case of the teacher and *babalaô* (Candomblé priest) Martiniano Elizeu do Bonfim, who in his eighties died in Salvador (Carneiro 1948). Moreover, the necessity of communication in the trade and in daily life among different African speakers concentrated in an urban centre supported the emergence of a vehicular language that Rodrigues denominated “Nagot dialect”. According to him, it was a mixture of Portuguese and African languages and, as we can imagine, certainly had an important Yoruba-based vocabulary preserved and related to religious and liturgical practices. Unfortunately, Rodrigues did not bother to register them as he did with the other five African languages (Tapa, Grunche, Fulani, Hausa, Djedje-Mahi), probably because only a few survivors in that city spoke that language when he conducted his research. Therefore, this “Nagot dialect” was not meant to thrive in the Yoruba language, as many researchers seem to think. In fact Yoruba’s in Brazil were traditionally known as Nagots, derived from the kingdom of Ketu in the present-day Republic of Benin.

Impressed by this overall presence, Rodrigues erroneously concluded that the Yoruba’s were the most numerous and influential Africans in Bahia although his research only comprised the city of Bahia and not Congolese and Angolans who lived there, as Rodrigues declared himself (1945: 193). In addition the Yoruba had at their disposal a literature that conferred on them, from an occidental viewpoint, a certain prestige comparable to the European languages. Considering that many of their speakers practiced Islam and followed the Koran, Rodrigues ended with exalting the Yoruba supremacy in Brazil, attributed accordingly this same parameter to the superiority of the culture of its people in comparison with other black Africans.

1. Methodological and pioneering continuity

In the 1930s the posthumous publication of Rodrigues’s work *The Africans in Brazil* was organized by Homero Pires and awakened a major interest in Afro-Brazilian studies. With the exception of the

pioneering efforts of Renato Mendonça (1935) and Jacques Raimundo (1933) on the influence of African languages on the Portuguese of Brazil, the majority of published works concentrated on religion, attracting to Bahia foreign researchers with an international reputation, among them Roger Bastide and Pierre Verger.

Notwithstanding the existence of otherwise oriented scientific studies, all follow in Rodrigues's steps. They concentrate their research on the Candomblé houses in the city of Salvador, in which the rites and myths of the Yoruba pantheon can easily be distinguished empirically. This is also the case, although not with such intensity, with the religious manifestations of Ewe-Fon based languages in São Luis, in the state of Maranhão, as well as in Northeast Brazil. The result of this methodological continuity was the development of an erroneous tendency to reduce the history of the Africans in Brazil to the history of the Yoruba people, a scientific panorama Valdés Acosta repeated for Cuba (2002: 3). Consequently, all African traditions were explained through a Yoruba optic. Allsopp (1996: 130), for example, attributes a Yoruba origin to the Bantuism *calalu*, current in Caribbean English to designate a soup of vegetables. Ortiz (1991: 56) commits the same error with the origin of another Bantuism, *bilongo*, medicament, magic, both registered in Brazil with the same meaning. Edison Carneiro (1937), author of a book dedicated to the Bantu blacks in Brazil, admitted the cultural inferiority of these people, a standing stereotype in Brazilian historiography. It suggests that Congolese (including those in the English-speaking Caribbean) and Angolans are less intelligent and lazy according to Allsopp (1996: 167).

Already in the 1960s, with the policies of cultural relations of Brazil with Africa, the Brazilian Portuguese was taught in universities in Senegal and Nigeria. The universities of Bahia and then São Paulo also began offering practical courses of Yoruba via their recently created centres of African studies. From there, conceiving the African continent as one singular country, a "unique" Africa, of Yoruba language and culture, became popular in Brazil meanwhile relegating the participation of other black African people equally expressive in the process of configuring the profile of representative language and culture of Brazil to a second plan.

In this sense, with my doctoral thesis *De l'intégration des apports africains dans les parlers de Bahia au Brésil* presented at the National

University of Zaire in Lubumbashi in 1976, a new stage was inaugurated in Afro-Brazilian studies signifying the rediscovery of the importance of the Bantu world and its repercussions in Brazil. For the first time, the field research in the city of Salvador was extended to Africa from the Gulf of Benin to Guthrie's linguistic zones H (Kikongo/Kimbundu) and R (Umbundu). At that same moment, through the exchange with the National University of Zaire, the Centre of Afro-Oriental Studies of the Federal University of Bahia offered the first course of Kikongo and Bantu linguistics in Brazil. This last course, with a more academic orientation, was discontinued due to a lack of interest, whereas the Kikongo course was continued, having attracted members of the Congo-Angola religious community of Bahia, thanks to the efforts of a former student and his teacher, the unforgettable Tata Raimundo Pires, also a member of that community (Pessoa Castro 1997).

These efforts reflected a methodological reorientation in ethno- and linguistic research, whose objective was to study the African way of speaking in Bahia, which was communication using lexical (morpho-semantic) systems of African languages spoken in Brazil and modified by the Portuguese influence. The goal was to study the mechanisms of its integration into the regional Portuguese of Bahia as well as in the Portuguese repertoire of Brazil. The point of departure was the analysis of the Afro-Brazilian liturgical languages, by its own nature closer to its original models (Pessoa de Castro 1998; 2005).

2. Results of research

Taking into consideration that the living language of the people is the most vivid testimony of its history, the existing information was extended and enriched through knowledge of the language, religion, and popular cultures of Brazil. This research revealed the Bantu presence as the oldest and superior in number and geographic distribution in the Brazilian territory under the colonial slave regime. It must be noted that the human trade to Brazil was just as consistent as the trade Portugal had already conducted with the Kingdom of Congo in the sixteenth century. The striking presence of the African element returns in the Portuguese literature of that period when Gil Vicente reproduces

the black speech of Lisbon in his short, satirical theatre pieces, such as “Bitter Love” and “The Clergyman from Beira”.

Regarding Brazil, the Bantus people were initially brought from the Kingdom of Congo, then from port settlements along the Angolan coast, and later from Mozambique. A relevant testimony of this fact is the nomenclature of the Republic of Palmares in the seventeenth century, the largest and longest-standing *quilombo* in Brazilian history (Moura 1959), whose most important leaders were Ganga Zumba and Zumbi, titles of indubitable Bantu origin. Its topography – Dembo, Macaco, Osengo, Cafuxi, and the word *quilombo* (kilombo) itself, meaning a settlement of black people – are of Bantu origin, as is the African vocabulary associated with the regime of slavery: *senzala* (slave hut), *mucama* (female servant), *moleque* (black child), *carimbo* (stamp), *banzo* (sadness). Another evidence is the larger number of Bantu toponyms in comparison with others of African origin in rural as well as in urban zones, such as Bacanga, Gandu, Caçanje, Catete, Moçambique, Mombaça, Cambuta, the equivalent of Cambute, related by Ortiz to Cuba.

The word Zumbi is a title that refers to the function of constructor, assistant, or chief of a village also found with the variants *zuma* and *zumba*, as in *Ganga Zuma* or *Zumba*, the Big Constructor. These words are confused in Brazilian studies with a form convergent in Portuguese from another verb-derived substantive of the Bantu word *zumbi*, or “nvumbi/nzumbi”, spirit of the dead, phantasm. With the same significance in the written variant “zombie” or “zombi”, it is also used in American Spanish and English to demonstrate that the geographic extension of Bantu influence exceeds the language and cultures of the Ibero-American world. In Haiti, for instance, among the African religious traditions that influence the life of its population, those dedicated to the Voodoo culture from Dahomey are most studied. This explains that their former dictators were addressed as Papa Doc and Babe Doc, titles of political-religious leadership with a mystical character, whereas the second element is the Bantu vocal “ndoki”, the master of healing, the healing doctor, which phonetically is confused and understood with the reduced form of “doctor” in English, or “docteur” in French, the official language of that country. From this same Bantu is derived the name Mandrake, the famous

magician-sorcerer and hero of the comic strips (Pessoa de Castro 2005: 274).

The use of the vocals of Bantu origin for religious purposes is predominant for different local practices. The oldest known is the *calundu* in Bahia that Nuno Pereira described in *O peregrino das Américas* (The Pilgrim of the Americas) in 1728, whereas the most famous are *Candomblé*, *Umbanda*, and *Macumba*, this last one also registered in Cuba by Fabelo and as “mayumba” in the work of Fernando Ortiz. Another important testimony of the antiquity of this presence is the so-called *Candomblé-de-caboclo* in Brazil, a product of the direct contact of Bantus with Brazilian Amerindians, the *caboclos*, a fact that can be proved by the Bantuisms *cafuzo*, in Portuguese, and *zambo*, in Spanish and English America to characterize the mestizo of black and Amerindian descent.

Moreover, it is worth mentioning that the principal characteristic of the vocabulary spoken by the *pretos-velhos* or *baculos* (Bantu “ba-kulu”, old people) during the religious ceremonies is the use of Bantu words modified by the initial increase of the morpheme [zi-], an old demonstrative that subsists optionally in Kikongo and Kimbundo and ends up contaminating Portuguese words, such as “zipai” (pai, father), “zifio” (filho, son). This phenomenon is also known in Cuba, under the form [si-], in the glossary of Afro-negrisms of Ortiz and of the Conga language residual enlisted by Fabelo, with the examples of *zingoma/singoma* (tambor) and *zimbomba/simbomba* (insipid) (Pessoa de Castro 2005: 90).

3. The Bantu legacy

The perdurability of the favoured presence of the superior number of the Bantu element in the demographic composition of colonial Brazil can be learned from its concentration in rural zones, isolated and certainly conservative, where in the past liberty meant escape to the *quilombos*. These zones were important factors of social and geographical order, which recalled the extensive and persisting Bantu influence in the configuration of the representative culture and language of Brazil. Moreover, the contributions of Bantu origin were integrated into the national patrimony as symbols of *Brasilidade*,

which does not mean that the average Brazilian was conscious of its African, and even less of its Bantu, origin.

The most notable manifestations are of Bantu origin and appropriated as authentic Brazilian, such as the *rhythm of the samba*, the play-fight of the *capoeira of Angola* with its beats from the *berimbau* or *urucungo*, and songs in honour of *Aruanda* (Luanda) in the sense of a mythical Africa inhabited by gods and forefathers. Similarly, the *ganzá* and the *cuíca* are characteristic of Brazilian music and indispensable instruments in the percussion of the samba schools of carnival in Rio de Janeiro. The names of typical Latin American dances also are of Bantu origin: besides the Brazilian *samba* and the Argentinean *tango*, there is *mambo*, *merengue*, *rumba*, *conga* accompanied by the *marimba* and the *bongo*. Another important testimony of the amplitude of this presence is the play-dance or drum-beat largely distributed in Spanish America called *calinda/kalinda*. This word is found in the English of Trinidad/Tobago where the dance is also performed (Codallo 1983). In Brazil it is called *maculele*, also a Bantu-based denomination.

The historical importance of the kingdom of Congo is still reflected in dramatic representations of Brazilian folklore in numerous regions, through specific popular performances called *congos* and *candombe*. The latter is celebrated in Minas Gerais and is a popular manifestation of black origin in Argentina and Uruguay. The *Mani-congo* (lord of Congo) is always remembered in verses such as “The old Cabinda arrived/ and the king of Congo spoke”. The same memory is also registered for Queen Jinga or Zinga of the old kingdom of Matamba in present-day Angola. It is important to realize that the term *candombe* does not derive from the etymon “ndombe”, black, as has been explained erroneously (Montaño 1995: 440). It concerns the Bantu lexem “kandombe”, derived from “kulomba”, to pray or to ask for the intervention of the gods, similar to the word Candomblé in Brazil (Pessoa de Castro 2005: 195-196).

Significant traces of the Bantu lexical system are found in work songs performed during the harvest of beans and corn, the so-called *batas* (Bantu “kubata”, to fan) in popular storytelling, whose thematic structure is populated with fantastic beings of the Bantu world, among them *calunga*, *quibungo*, *tutu moringa*, and *cafuringa*, equivalent of “moringa” and “cafunga” of the Afro-Cuban folklore (Ortiz 1991).

Interestingly enough, *Bambi* and *Dumbo* or *Jumbo*, the roe and the elephant of the animated designs of Walt Disney, have Bantu names, whereas in Portuguese, the most dandyish of the seven dwarfs of Snow White is *Dunga*, another Bantuism.

In reference to the influence of the African languages on Brazilian Portuguese, Bantu speech was indubitably the most significant in social interaction in colonial Brazil, in contact with the old Portuguese, and, on a minor scale, with indigenous languages. It configured the process of differentiation that removed the language from its spoken matrix in Portugal. Innumerable isolated rural speeches that preserve a Bantu lexical system are still found today, which are probably traces inherited from old *quilombos*, such as those found in the states of São Paulo and Minas Gerais, among others (Pessoa de Castro 2005).

Otherwise, to the degree that the synchronic profundity reveals a diachronic antiquity, this influence becomes evident because of sizeable: 1) of lexical Bantu-based contributions completely integrated into the Portuguese linguistic system, for example of the verbs in the first conjugation (ar), like *chuetar*, to ridicule (Kik. “tyetela”); 2) of Portuguese derivations formed from the same Bantu root through prefixes or suffixes, such as in “nleke”, child, youngster = *moleque* = *amolecar* (to behave as a child), *molequinho* (little boy), *molecote* (little boy), or also, prefixes like – eiro, in *marombeiro*, sorcerer, marimba dancer or – dor in *chuetador*, one who ridicules.

In the majority of cases it concerns current words on all levels of the languages and some known in Portugal (*cachimbo*, *cachaça*, *carimbo*, *miçanga*, *moleque*), only that the Brazilian speaker in general is incapable of distinguishing whether they are of African or Amerindian descent or even not of Portuguese descent. Examples are *tanga*, *sunga*, *cacimba*, *calunga*, *maconha* or *diamba*, (*ma*)*riamba*, the same root as “marijuana” in Spanish- and Angloamerican. In some cases the Bantu lexem completely replaces the equivalent Portuguese word, like *caçula* for benjamin, *corcunda* for hump, *moringa* for water jar, *marimbondo* for wasp, *cochilar* for to fall asleep, *bunda* for buttocks. According to the glossary of Ortiz (1991), the cases of derivation mentioned here also happen in Cuban Spanish as the examples mentioned above have demonstrated and only differ slightly in form but with the same meanings as in Brazilian Portuguese.

Among the Afro-Brazilian religions of Congo-Angola descent, besides preserving a Bantu-based lexical system such as is the case of the “Congo language” of Cuba (Granda 1973; Fabelo s.d.), persist of beliefs and rites of the pantheon of the old kingdom of Congo. That notwithstanding, many of them have the tendency to grade their symbolic structure by the patterns of the Nagot-Ketu Candomblé with the worship of their *orishas*, due to the social prestige they have in Brazil, also exported to Argentina, Uruguay, and Portugal. Such prestige results from the fact that these Candomblés were the object of specialized studies in Afro-Brazilian religions since Nina Rodrigues. They have attracted an increasing number of intellectuals, artists, and politicians, who eventually occupied important functions in the socio-religious hierarchy of the group. This was the case for Nina Rodrigues, Roger Bastide, and Pierre Verger.

Meanwhile, despite the exploration of the image of Yoruba *orishas* and their publicity executed in the benefice of governmental institutions and tourist spectacles, the *congo-angola candomblé* is resistant to this impact and conserves a Bantu-based liturgical language that is also found in Cuba. This resistance is more explicit at this moment because their followers become increasingly conscious of the rediscovery of the greatness of the Bantu world and its contributions to the culinary traditions, flora and fauna, customs, and habits of daily life of Brazilians. Moreover, Bantus were the principal agents and transmitters of Portuguese on the Brazilian territory under the colonial slavery system, i.e. e. for three consecutive centuries.

In summary, in spite of the importance of the Bantu influence, we must consider that, historically, Brazilian language and culture are the result of an implicit movement of Africanisation of the Portuguese and, inversely, the increasing influence of Portuguese on African languages. The pre-existing and local Amerindian languages in Brazil also have had their impact. The major or minor grade of acceptance of these multiple and reciprocal influences or of the resistance against them is a question involving the historical and socio-cultural order.

Although this process of Africanisation is indebted to the territorial expansion and occupation, demographic density, and the antiquity of the Bantu people in colonial Brazil, “bantuizing” Brazil as a counterpoint to the “Yoruba-centrism”, which has prevailed in Afro-Brazilian studies is not an option. I think that this is also valid for Afro-

American studies since there is a general tendency of privileging the old kingdom of Congo, its people and languages to the disadvantage of others that were equally active in the process of consolidation of the Bantu legacy in Brazil and in the Americas.

I am referring here to the Ambundo and Ovimbundu. The latter presence was characteristic in the State of Minas Gerais where they worked in the mines. Today this region still registers a large number of localities where certain special languages are known based on a lexical system of Umbundu (Machado Filho 1944). Kimbundu was certainly one of the most frequently spoken languages in Brazil because of the dense commercial ties that were established with the ports along the coast of Angola in the seventeenth century. The name Angola remained registered in one of the manifestations considered among the most representative of Brazilian culture: the Angolan play-fight of *capoeira*. At that time speakers of Congo and Angola were so numerous in the city of Bahia that in 1697 the Portuguese missionary Pedro Dias published *A Arte da Língua de Angola* (The Art of the Language of Angola) to facilitate the Jesuits' indoctrination of the 25,000 Africans in that city without speaking Portuguese, as witnessed, in that period, by Padre Antonio Vieira (Silva Neto 1963: 82).

The question, though, is how to identify those people when the historical documentation about the trade is insufficient and unreliable regarding ethnic origins. Considering African languages and religions have developed since the arrival of the Africans in America, the first proposal is to collect all the Bantuisms in the Afro-American bibliography we have at our disposal, identify probable and possible etymons, precise meanings and most frequent semantic camps, geographic areas and levels of languages in which they appear, to beginning with the liturgical language because of its conservative and archaic aspect (Pessoa de Castro 2005).

The second stage would be to confront written documentation about the transatlantic trade to broaden and deepen our knowledge in a more justified way, in relationship with the importance not only of a specific group of people but also of other ones brought from the Bantu world to the Americas.

This proposal was formulated in my dissertation project in 1976 and should become the point of departure for a project of triangular research. It will reveal aspect still unknown about the Bantu language,

not only in Brazil but also in the Spanish American world. The optic of such an interpretation reconstructs the cultures and languages of the Bantu group and will legitimise its role in the configuration of differences that brush aside the official Ibero-American profile from their respective European matrix. We cannot forget that the black African has learned the languages of European colonization as a second language and has contributed to its distribution in the territories of South America and the Caribbean. This African presence, therefore, is as characteristic as the implantation of the official languages, Portuguese, Spanish, English, French, and Dutch in the (former) colonies and contemporary republics on the American continent.

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